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# Development of mountain domestic tourism close to the major urban areas of Nepal: South side of the Annapurna Massif and Helambu

Peer-reviewed article

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## Introduction

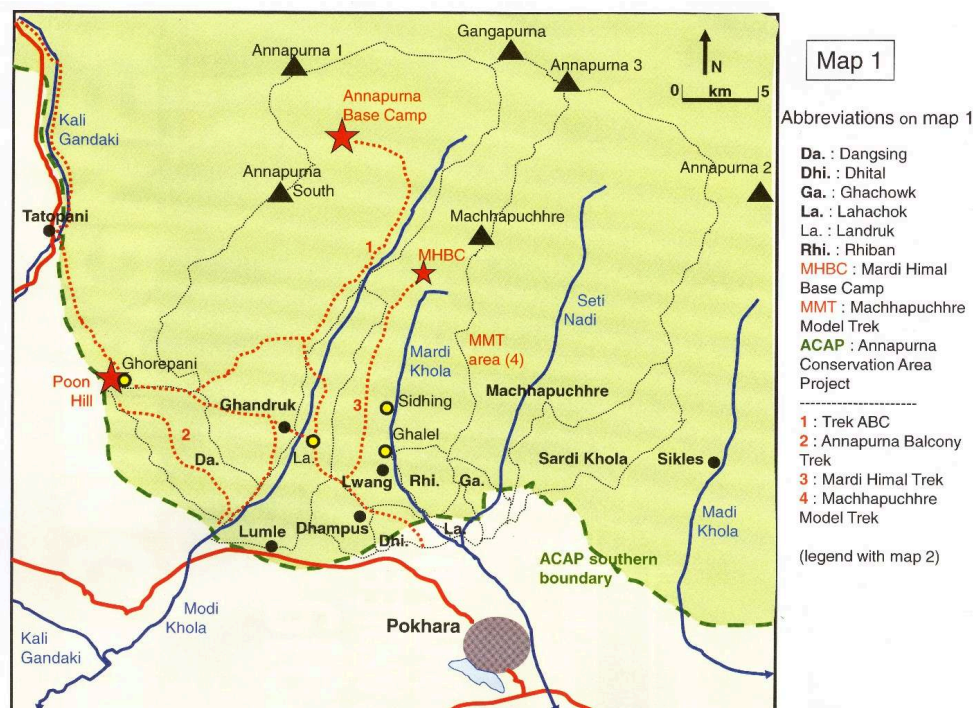
- <sup>1</sup> The Nepal Himalayas, which form a continuous broad strip of just under 800 km in the north of the country and boast eight of the fourteen summits over 8,000 m, have played a key role in the growth and codification of trekking as a tourist practice (Stevens, 1983; Sacareau, 1997; Plagnol, Raspaud, 2004), and are still an iconic destination. Extensive research has been carried out on the tourism model which developed in Nepal in the late 1970s, focusing on the imaginaries underpinning it, trekkers' practices, the organisation of tourist offerings, and its positive and negative impacts on the territories involved (Adams, 1992; Sacareau, 1999; Nepal, 2000; Stevens, 2003; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2014, etc.). It was initially a form of adventure tourism practised predominantly by western tourists,<sup>1</sup> and was concentrated in three main areas – major routes around the Annapurnas, Langtang and the Gosainkund lakes, and Khumbu and treks to Everest. Although Nepal is invariably depicted by western tour operators as a paradise for trekkers with timeless mountain landscapes, it is now clear that this rosy aura was never actually reflected in high visitor numbers: despite the power exerted on the imagination by this image, the high potential of the Nepalese Himalayas (Zurick, 1992), and steady growth in the tourism sector since the country opened up,<sup>2</sup> numbers of trekkers on trails are relatively low, accounting for approximately one quarter of the 940,000 foreign tourists in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 Although it is not being challenged as such, the original tourism model for trekking does nevertheless seem to be evolving since the resumption of activity when peace returned after the civil war, and it now coexists where necessary in the mountains alongside other tourist activities with which it can be combined (Dériz *et al.*, 2017). Treks have got shorter as new roads mean that they can start at higher altitudes, and their duration has been reduced; the iconic Annapurnas trek has been compressed to just over a week (9 days) from 23 days in the 1990s. The popularity of shorter routes also reflects the change in demand from time-poor customers for whom the trek is just one of many elements of their trip to Nepal, albeit an important one. In parallel, the quality of the rapidly expanding accommodation sector on the most popular routes has been improving steadily. Other outdoor activities such as kayaking, paragliding, canyoning, trail running, and wildlife watching have also expanded, sometimes in combination with trekking (e.g. yoga treks), for an increasingly diverse range of customers. In addition to traditional western customers, some mountain routes also attract many Chinese<sup>4</sup> and southeast Asian visitors, as well as growing numbers of Nepalese tourists.
- 3 Our research focuses on this recent surge in domestic tourism in the Himalayan valleys and mountains alike and the initial findings are presented in this article. Based on fieldwork, it presents two hypotheses: firstly, that the vast majority of these Nepalese tourists are from big cities (notably Kathmandu and Pokhara), and secondly that mountain areas closest to these big cities are becoming increasingly attractive for domestic tourism development as improved access to the valleys brings them closer both temporally and spatially to city centres. Both study areas – the south side of the Annapurna massif, north of Pokhara (the Modi, Mardi and Seti river valleys) and Helambu, north-east of Kathmandu – have numerous ties of dependency and complementarity with nearby urban areas. Our broad definition of tourist practices includes recreational activities, some of which do not necessarily involve an overnight stay and fall into the category of excursions.
- 4 After a brief overview of current developments in the tourism system in the two areas cited above, this article will analyse the recent boom in domestic tourism there in terms of practices first of all, before attempting to extract some preliminary findings on cultural representations of the mountain and recreational activities in the mountains (Debarbieux, 2001) which underpin this development, based on the large number of interviews conducted (approximately 150). From a methodological perspective, the research adopted an iterative approach, combining observation in the field with semi-structured and free interviews with managers, tour operators, local officials, villagers, and tourists. In these exchanges, some of which were scheduled (with contacts) and others opportunistic (in the field), questions on practices were specific, but the approach to representations was deliberately very indirect, with no direct questions about the landscape, for example. Research on the south side of the Annapurna massif was much more extensive (two group trips and two Masters study trips between 2014 and 2016, within the ANR AQAPA framework<sup>5</sup>) than in Helambu (one trip, in 2018, for comparative purposes), but it was supplemented in both areas by input from doctoral research and field trips conducted by P.K. Upadhyaya (Upadhyaya, 2013; Dawadi, Upadhyaya, 2013).

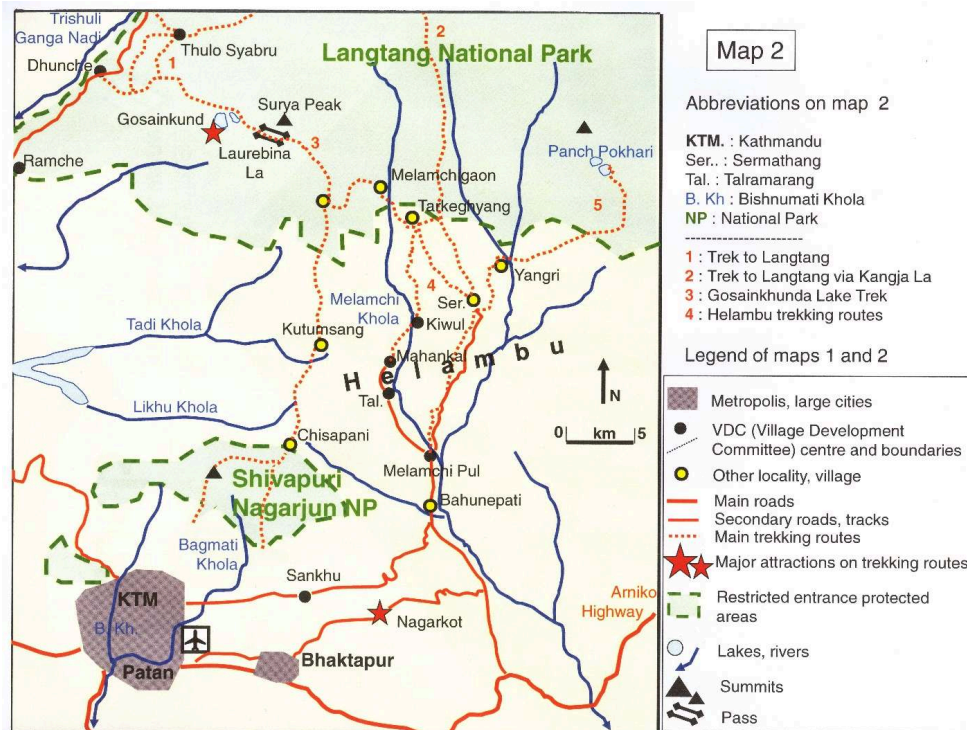
## I. Contemporary diversification and dissemination of tourism practices in mountains which are becoming more accessible

- 5 The two rural mountain spaces studied are both relatively close to the two largest urban centres in the country, and both span areas with longstanding tourism development and areas where this activity is discreet or virtually non-existent. The south side of the Annapurna massif (Document 1) directly north of Pokhara (414,000 inhabitants in the urban area) follows a sort of inverse west-east gradient from the Modi Khola valley and its tributaries on the right bank, with some of the busiest trekking routes in the country (Annapurna Base Camp trek, Annapurna Balcony trek (Poon Hill) to the Mardi Khola and Seti Nadi valleys where tourism development is more recent and limited (Mardi Himal trek). Structured primarily around the upper reaches of the Melamchi Khola and its tributaries, Helambu (Document 2) begins some twenty kilometres (as the bird flies) north-east of the city of Kathmandu (3.4 million inhabitants in the urban area), but still has a more limited facilities and lower visitor numbers than the Gosainkund lakes and Langtang, the region with third highest density of trekkers in the country<sup>6</sup> which it borders to the north-west and north. Only the northern area falls within the boundaries of the Langtang National Park, but the whole of the area south of the Annapurna massif which was studied is included in the ACAP (Annapurna Conservation Area Project). Another significant difference is that Helambu – like Langtang further north – was much more seriously impacted by the earthquake in April 2015 than the south side of the Annapurna massif, where the damage was less extensive.

Document 1: Map of the study area on the southern slopes of the Annapurna Massif



Document 2: Map of the study area north-east of Kathmandu (Helambu, South Langtang, Melamchi Khola basin)



- 6 Three main points common to both territories emerge from this research focusing on current developments in the tourism system. The first involves the local context in which this system is expressed: these two spaces both demonstrate the paradoxical traits of territories characterised by varying degrees of rural decline and by an active phase of transport and communications infrastructure projects. These would appear to be two facets of the same process of intensification of relations with the urban world which is coming ever closer both physically and functionally. As a result of the massive exodus of young adults seeking employment in the big cities (Kathmandu, and Pokhara on the Annapurna side) or abroad (Aubriot, Bruslé, 2012; Gurung, 2012), the population of mountain villages is now significantly older and this is coupled with a higher proportion of women, as most employment-related outmigration involves men, particularly on the south side of the Annapurna massif (Kaspar, 2005; Gartaula, 2007; Stuhau, 2013; Dério et al., 2016). The shortage of workers has led to the extensification or abandonment of agriculture in more remote or steep areas and a return to scrub and then forest (cf. Khanal, Wanatabee, 2006 on the south side of Annapurna massif (Sikles); O'Neil, 2016: 21 for Helambu). This process is partly associated with wildlife protection and restrictions on use imposed by the introduction of protected areas (ACAP and Langtang National Park, cf. Pokharel, 2005, p. 112). However, where households still retain their local ties, they operate on a broader and more multiscale socio-economic basis (Aase et al., 2019), using the relatively regular payments sent back to the village by those who have left. This money helps them in their everyday life and allows them to invest in home improvements, agriculture or tourism. (Létang et al., 2017).<sup>7</sup>
- 7 Although some family homes are being shut down, becoming a type of second home in some instances, upgrades to facilities in villages are continuing, including

electrification, installation of a water supply, and mobile phone coverage, especially in tourist areas to meet visitor requirements, as was already observed in the Modi Kohla valley in the 1990s (Sacareau 1999, p. 33). Like the rest of the country, but possibly at a faster pace due to the proximity of a large urban hub, these spaces are also benefitting from the introduction of active policies to open up areas, with the most obvious evidence in the landscape being spatial organisation and the rapid construction of a road network which is severely constrained by differences in altitude, unstable ground, and sheer slopes. (Fort, Cossart, 2011). Roads, which are often poorly built and regularly damaged by water runoff and landslides during the monsoon season, are gradually improving and new tracks connecting villages which are still remote are appearing every year. The introduction of regular bus routes on these roads (Document 3), services provided by off-road vehicles, and widespread access to mountainside villages by motorbike have improved interaction of all types with nearby cities (Dawadi, Upadhayaya, 2013), even for villages at altitude. In Helambu, for example, a road connected Kathmandu to Melamchi (900 m) in 1997, then climbed up to Sermanthang (2,600 m) in 2008. On the south side of the Annapurna massif, the trail from Pokhara reached the Seti Nadi valley bottom in 2007, and the village of Sidhing (1,700 m) in the upper Mardi Khola valley in 2013.

Document 3: Arrival of the bus from Pokhara to Ghachowk (1,260 m) in the Seti Nadi valley



P. Dérioz -22/4/2016)

- 8 These new roads, which are relatively suitable for motor vehicles, have an ambivalent relationship with tourist activities (Jacquemet, Sacareau, 2016); they are rebarbative to trekkers in areas where they are a dusty substitute for former trekking trails (Bardecki, 2009). However, by cutting access times to the tops of the valleys and to high mountain areas, they make it easier to get supplies to tourist facilities at altitude and facilitate shorter, cheaper trips. In the 1970s and 1980s, some treks to Helambu and Langtang

actually started in Kathmandu, and Pokhara was the departure and arrival point for most trekkers doing the Annapurna circuit.

- 9 Although the role of these two cities as centres for organising tourism in nearby mountain areas has steadily expanded (Sacareau, 2000), this direct pedestrian link has now largely disappeared and tourism practices in the mountain have become extremely diverse due to increasing proximity. This second point is evidenced by interviews with tourists and service providers and analysis of offerings on their websites. Trekking still has a key position and is the most popular activity for foreign customers, but the way in which it is carried out has changed considerably and the range of activities practised by visitors in these spaces has expanded significantly in line with new international tourism trends and a more diverse customer base, which we will examine in Part 2. In simple terms, a significant proportion of trekkers today are keen to enjoy quality experiences without sacrificing too much time or compromising too heavily on comfort. Alongside the major classics such as the ABC Annapurna Base Camp trek (approximately 8 days), short treks of about a week, or sometimes less, which are relatively varied (with villages) and moderately difficult, but provide access to spectacular views over the high mountains, are very popular. These include the Annapurna Balcony trek lasting 5-6 days, the highlight being sunrise over the Himalayan summits from Poon Hill, (3,190 m) (Document 1 and 4). With some thirty lodges and hotels, Ghorepani, at the foot of Poon Hill, looks like a proper mountain resort (Document 5). There is also a relatively high uptake for the Mardi Himal trek (approximately one week on the ridge between Modi Khola and Mardi Khola, which climbs up towards Machhapuchhre), frequently described as “off the beaten track” – a very relative concept now – and the Helambu trek (lasting 6-8 days, and advertised by one operator<sup>8</sup> on its website as “a perfect short trek nearby Kathmandu Valley”, combining majestic “natural” landscapes with an opportunity to discover Yolmo culture).

**Document 4: Domestic and international tourists at Poon Hill (3,193 m) admiring the sunrise over the Annapurnas.**



Annapurna South, Hiunchuli, and Machhapuchhre in the background on the right. It is accessed before daybreak in single file from Ghorepani for a fee. The view from this heavily developed site with its paved platform, metal observation tower and refreshment stand, also encompasses the Dhaulagiri massif to the north-west

P. Dérioz -11/2014

## Document 5: Ghorepani, 2,858 m above sea level



Unlike Ghandruk, which also boasts some thirty lodges and hotels, Ghorepani (literally “watering point for horses”) was not strictly speaking a village and its expansion is directly related to tourism, and to the popularity of the viewpoint at Poon hill in particular. All the buildings in the photo are tourist accommodation, the most recent of which are the larger three-storey structures in the background. The building at the top of the hill was still under construction in 2014.

P. Dério - 16/11/2014

- 10 In this context, all forms of tourist accommodation are more than just basic stopovers on trekking routes. Short-stay tourism in hotels, resorts and homestays is also beginning to make an appearance, combining, to varying degrees, a naturalist component (birdwatching trips in the upper Seti Nadi valley, for example); a cultural component (the appeal of the Gurung or Tamang cultures north of Pokhara, and the Yolmo Sherpa in Helambu (Pokharel, 2005)); a spiritual component (sacred sites and religious festivals, and also retreat centres and yoga retreats); and a hedonistic component (local produce and traditional food and drink, hot springs). Other outdoor sporting activities are developing, such as paragliding, canyoning at sites created in the Mardi Khola and Seti Nadi valleys, and also trail running. The first Helambu marathon was organised in 2015 and repeated in October 2018. Although the paragliders on Odane Hill and the birdwatchers on the upper reaches of the Seti Nadi are mostly Westerners, the Helambu marathon runners were almost exclusively from Nepal.

## II. The contribution of Nepalese tourists to current customer diversification: the rise in domestic tourism in Nepal which includes mountains

- 11 A third aspect of this gradual transition from single-activity tourism based around international trekker footfall to the emergence of a more diverse leisure space is the

growing proportion of Nepalese customers, a fact which is regularly reported in the national press (*My Republica*, *The Himalayan Times*, *The Rising Nepal*, *The Kathmandu Post*, etc. cf. annexe 1).<sup>9</sup> This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Nepal is a poor country; in 2018 it was ranked 25th in the league table of countries producing the lowest per capita wealth (883 dollars of GDP per inhabitant), with one quarter of the population still living below the poverty line in 2011 according to the World Bank. It has not featured among the Asian countries in which domestic tourism has been documented and analysed in research in the last twenty years, either generically (Ghimire, 2001; Aramberri, 2004; Cabasset-Semedo *et al.*, 2010 Singh, 2011), or by country (Indonesia (Cabasset, 2001), Thailand (Evrard, 2006), India (Sacareau, 2011), China (Wen, 1997; Wu *et al.*, 2000; Taunay, 2009; Harrison, 2016), Vietnam (Peyvel, 2009; Bui and Joliffe, 2011), Myanmar (Michalon, 2018), Malaysia (Chiu *et al.*, 2015)). The large body of scientific literature on tourism in Nepal still focuses almost exclusively on international tourism (Thapa, 2004; Holden A., 2010; Paudyal, 2012; Sutihar, 2013; Nepal, 2015, etc.), the changing provenances and practices of international tourists (circa 1.12 million arrivals in 2018), the social and environmental impacts of this tourism, and public policy aimed at developing it as a strategic economic sector. With the exception of internal travel back to their homes and villages by workers who have moved to the city or abroad temporarily or permanently, and travel for religious festivals at sacred sites (pilgrimages), the issue of travel for domestic tourism has barely been addressed in research relating to Nepal, either nationally or internationally (Baniya, Paudel, 2016, p. 17). Currently, this strand is not even represented in national tourism statistics.

- 12 Yet a report produced by a British NGO in 2013 highlighted the significance of this domestic tourism: *Domestic travel and tourism represents a very significant market, but very little is known about the phenomenon. Domestic tourism is likely to have represented 55-65% of tourism GDP in 2012. [...] it is poorly understood and underemphasised by government, international agencies and some in business. [...] and knowledge gaps on domestic tourism should be filled urgently.* (Jones, 2013, pp. 8, 16 & 34).<sup>10</sup> Although there is insufficient data to document this growth, domestic tourism in Nepal appears to have risen steadily since the end of the civil war (1996-2006). Tour operators interviewed first began to notice this growth in about 2010; plummeting international tourist numbers after the earthquake in 2015 became particularly obvious in 2016. The Nepalese state became aware of this trend and the potential it offered, explicitly targeting domestic tourists in the Nepal Tourism Board campaign in 2016, and again in 2018-19 with the “*Pahile Desh, Ani Bidesh*” – “first country, then abroad” – campaign (Neupane, 2019). In the summer of 2019, the Nepal Tourism Board decided to carry out a survey to quantify domestic footfall, which by its own in-house reckoning was 5 million people in 2018. Lastly, some studies reflect the existence of this domestic tourism indirectly, by making a distinction in their surveys, for example, between stakeholders working in international tourism and those working in domestic tourism (Arai, Goto, 2017).
- 13 This rise tends to be accompanied by a diversification both in domestic destinations and in the practices of Nepalese tourists. They include more trekking and outdoor activities, long held to be the preserve of Westerners, to the extent that special products are now gradually being introduced for them. Domestic tour packages organised by some agencies<sup>11</sup> offer specially priced excursions, for example to Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park, to the sources of the Bishnumati Khola which passes through Kathmandu 10 km downstream, short treks (2-3 days) in the “hills” (circa 2,000

m) to the north-east of Kathmandu (Chisapani-Nagarkot), and even fast treks (4-5 days: Khumbu, Gosainkund lakes, etc.). In their advertising, these agencies emphasise the blend of natural landscapes and cultural and religious aspects.

- 14 Observations in the field on the south side of the Annapurna massif and in Helambu (Dérizot *et al.*, 2017; Létang *et al.*, 2017; Bachimon, 2017) confirm the growing vogue among Nepalese people for the Himalaya mountains, even though the proportions of domestic and international customers vary depending on the place and activity pursued. In terms of trekking, the majority of international customers stick to the major traditional routes, but they are now being joined there by growing numbers of Nepalese visitors. Thus, the ABC trek which had a global footfall of 52,000 trekkers in 2013, mostly foreigners, has attracted over 3,000 Nepalese visitors in recent years (source ACAP). The neighbouring Mardi Himal trek, which was only “officially” opened in 2012, has since become a real success story, and the proportion of domestic trekkers has now risen to at least half according to the estimates of operators we met on the ground (lodge owners, guides, etc.). Interviews (and direct counts) suggest that between a quarter and a third of the trekkers who complete some or all of the Helambu trek are Nepalese, which is consistent with the most recent data from Langtang National Park to the north, showing record footfall of 21,945 visitors, 75% of whom were international tourists and 25% Nepalese, in the last tax year (2018-19).<sup>12</sup>
- 15 As Nepalese nationals, these tourists enjoy a number of advantages over foreign travellers, not least that they speak the same language as the operators. This facilitates negotiation on the price of services and availability of places. However, observations on the ground, interviews with Nepalese and western trekkers, monitoring of online forums and blogs,<sup>13</sup> and press reviews (cf. annexe 1) provide a more mixed picture. On the one hand Nepalese trekkers enjoy lower rates for catering and accommodation, usually without guides or porters, since they are exempt as nationals from the requirement to purchase a permit to enter protected spaces (ACAP, Langtang national Park), but they are sometimes viewed as second-class customers by accommodation and transport service providers, who prefer a wealthier foreign clientele. On the other hand, according to the WTTC 2017 report (WTTC, 2018) Nepalese customers spend more on average than foreign customers across all types of tourism (cf. *Investment Board Nepal*, 2017),<sup>14</sup> a fact which is corroborated anecdotally by independent European trekkers who are not with a tour party and sometimes struggle to find accommodation in very popular stopover villages (Gandhruk, Ghorepani, etc.), whereas Nepalese groups do not experience any difficulty. This clear paradox can be interpreted in two, or even three, different ways. Although it undoubtedly reflects the emergence of a phase of domestic tourism whose potential is gradually being recognised by tour operators, it also highlights the internal economic diversity of the international clientele (young independent travellers on a tight budget vs groups with an agency) and of domestic customers (groups of students or young working people vs upper middle-class family groups and groups of friends or professionals). It would appear that these types of discrimination only occur where footfall comes close to the total capacity of accommodation on the most popular routes, with the Annapurna Balcony trek being one of the most obvious examples. Although most Nepalese visitors belong to the rising urban middle class, their choice of accommodation also reflects differences in budgets. Students and young people, who are often introduced to the mountains on one of the growing number of school trips and visits, tend to favour homestays wherever possible,

which are cheaper than the lodges, resorts and hotels popular with families or more affluent groups of friends.

- 16 Although Nepalese tourists favour the same seasons as international tourists for their trips to the mountains (spring and autumn, with slightly higher numbers in the winter than foreigners), their practices differ in terms of kit (lighter bags, less sophisticated equipment), independent organisation, and speed (faster walking speeds, longer stages, and shorter treks of 2-3 days) (Document 6). Proximity and ease of access via new roads on the south side of the Annapurna massif and in Helambu are key factors in attracting these tourists (Neupane, 2019), even though their enthusiasm for more inaccessible regions (Rara Lake, Mustang) for slightly longer periods has been observed to a lesser extent in the last two or three years. Other outdoor activities are popular in addition to trekking. In the Mardi Khola, the overwhelming majority of visitors to the only canyoning site, which was developed in 2014,<sup>15</sup> were young Nepalese, with approximately 1,500 domestic customers compared to fewer than fifty foreigners in the same year, according to canyoning instructors. The direct road link to Pokhara with a regular bus service plays a significant role and the requirement to obtain a fixed-price entry permit for the ACAP (irrespective of the duration of the stay) drives down international footfall for this type of activity on a day-trip basis. The situation is similar for bathing at the hot springs in Kharpani, in the upper reaches of the Seti Nadi, but the average age of the Nepalese customers making the return journey by bus or motorbike from Pokhara is much higher (Dériz et al., 2017).

**Document 6:** Two young Nepalese walkers with minimal kit climbing at a steady pace from Ghandruk to Tadapani.



A brief conversation with them revealed that they had come from Pokhara by motorbike for a three-day trek, via Poon Hill

P. Dériz - 18/11/2014

- 17 This proximity is also conducive to short leisure trips (holidays, weekend breaks) for Nepalese city-dwellers, predominantly groups of men, in villages with sufficient capacity. The sixty or so motorcyclists we met in late October 2018 in Chisapani on the south-west edge of Helambu, came to spend the afternoon and evening and stayed at a hotel. However, in the Mardi Khola valley (Lwang, Sidhing, Tokro) and the Seti Nadi valley (Mirsa, Khabre), most visitors opt for homestays (Létang *et al.*, 2017), and a large proportion are Nepalese. Of the 2,262 customers hosted between 2009 and 2014 in homestays in Lwang, four-fifths were Nepalese (Document 7). Similar figures are reported for other villages which have also developed community homestay programmes in hosts' homes, such as Sirubari<sup>16</sup>, in the hills south-west of Pokhara in the Syangja district, and Ghalegaon on south-east side of the Annapurna massif. The overall number of visitors to these villages, which varies depending on the location of the count, is nonetheless of the order of a few hundred visitors per year, thus providing sufficient local footfall to support an economic activity, while staying below the threshold for specialist tourist activity.

Document 7: Sleeping quarters in a *homestay* in Khabre, in the upper Seti Nadi valley



P. Dério - 24/11/2014).

### III. Cultural representations of the mountain landscape: an outline research framework for Nepalese customers

- 18 Although they are a socially and nationally diverse clientele, Nepalese tourists and international tourists both take part in most activities in all of these locations. They share the same accommodation and walk the same trails. But does the fact that

Nepalese nationals and foreigners broadly share a certain number of practices indicate a convergence of the social representations underpinning all their activities? The historical development of an imaginary of the Himalaya mountains and/or trekking created by Westerners has been documented in a number of studies analysing the interface between the various representational elements (Sacareau, 2010): transposition of the western landscape gaze and European and American mountain-walking cultures to the hugeness of the Himalayan landscape; a heroic echo of great feats in the history of exploration of the chain from the days of the early colonial expeditions to the conquest of the “eight-thousanders”, and the more intimate explorations of Alexandra David-Neel and Peter Mathiessen; the appeal of regions which have long been hidden or inaccessible (the myth of Shangri-La, the myth of absolute authenticity viewed through the lens of tourism); the non-specific appeal of eastern spiritualities (notably Buddhist) and the embodiment of the sacred in the mountain landscape which perfectly mirrors the asceticism of the physical exercise of walking – *“the body as mediator in a natural environment which has become a sanctuary and a heritage”* according to I. Sacareau (2010). The environment, and the physical challenges and demands, allow trekkers to connect on a personal level with the elitist aura of the true explorers and mountaineers (Beedie & Hudson, 2003), and to integrate it into the story of their own experience (Ladwein, 2005), whose milestones can be shared live on social media (Jacquemet, 2017).

- 19 The traditional mindset of local communities, which has been the focus of specific analysis in certain ethnic groups such as the Tamang people (Smadja, 2003) and the Yolmo Sherpas (Torri, 2019), is obviously quite different, and is loosely connected to the imaginary of destination. But what about the motivations and representations of the mountains of Nepalese tourists from Kathmandu or Pokhara? What inspires them, and what do they have in common with those of foreign tourists?<sup>17</sup>
- 20 Some preliminary answers emerge from fieldwork and interviews, and also desk research, which we share here with a degree of caution as the methodology for this research is still at an exploratory stage, but sufficiently well-developed to demonstrate that the wide range of representations which exist between individuals within the same customer category resists attempts at schematisation. This is quite clear in the words of this fifty-year old German trekker and seasoned visitor to Nepal who had come to try out the Mardi Himal trek independently (April 2016), but the complex imaginary cited above was far less obvious and more highly diluted into a less specific and reflexive form for tourist consumption by this group of young French adults on a trek with UCPA, whom we met in Landruk (November 2014). These differences also exist among Nepalese customers such as young people trying canyoning and city families who have come to relax at a homestay, for example. A pioneering study by Baniya and Paudel (2016) on the motivations of Nepalese domestic tourists reveals the predominance of push factors – top of which is a desire to get away from the daily grind, relax, and enjoy a variety of tourist experiences – and pull factors, most notably ease of access and cost, with cultural and historic motives outweighing a desire for adventure and nature. Given that their research encompasses all types of domestic tourism, we can therefore assume that those who have chosen the mountains, and possibly trekking, as a way of exploring them reflect a specific minority segment within the domestic customer base, most of whom prefer the Kathmandu valley, Lumbini, Chitwan (and more recently

Pokhara). What is noteworthy, is the key role of proximity (described at length for the two areas studied), and an interest in cultural aspects.

- 21 Representatives of this segment – who are themselves diverse – share with foreign customers an attraction to the views in very high mountain landscapes which are generally a significant factor in their choice of objectives and practice (viewpoints, photography). However, although they all concur when it comes to majestic panoramas and their aesthetic value, the criteria and references underpinning this value are not necessarily similar,<sup>18</sup> and the comments and attitudes of Nepalese tourists reveal two strands. In a country where the divine and the sacred inform the landscape (Leconte-Tilouine, 2003), the religious dimension is almost always present when reading the landscape. It can be the main factor in the choice of destination since treks can be experienced as a pilgrimage, for example to the Gosainkund lakes for Hindus, or Milarepa's cave (Tarkeghyang) for Buddhists, or the pilgrimage itself can take the form of a trek. Although the religious or spiritual element is not the main motive for the trek, having a view of the elegant contours of Machhapuchhre, the iconic home of Shiva, from which climbers are banned, is a very special experience for those who follow the ridge towards Mardi Himal base camp. Many, including Nepalese operators and trekkers alike, express a feeling of national pride at the sight of these landscapes which attract visitors from all over the world. For these young Nepalese workers from Kathmandu flying their national flag and holding out a selfie stick for a group photo against the backdrop of Ganesh Himal from the Laurebina Pass (Document 8), the religious connection with the sacred lake excavated by Shiva in person, their attachment to their country, and their position as urban tourists in a globalised world fit together seamlessly in one of the many forms of mental "negotiation" (Nepal, 2015), or cognitive "accommodation" (Létang et al., 2017) through which changes in contemporary society operate.

**Document 8: a young Nepalese trekker waving his national flag at Lauribina La (4,610 m)**



A young Nepalese trekker waving his national flag at Lauribina La (4,610 m), above the Gosainkund sacred lakes, against the backdrop of Surya kund (the lake of Surya, the Hindu god of the sun).

P. Bachimon -23/10/2018)

- 22 The second significant point, which is more relevant to family groups in homestays, is the appeal of the country's rural roots associated with a desire to "switch off and get out into the countryside" (in the words of the manager of a trekking agency in Pokhara) identified by Baniya and Paudel (2016), and this can take various forms. One of these is an interest in the culture of certain mountain ethnic communities, as evidenced by the high footfall in villages where this has been developed. The ACAP organiser of the Gurung village of Ghandruk estimated in October 2014 that it welcomed 80,000 Nepalese visitors per year, a high proportion of whom were students and schoolchildren, and only 10,000 of whom were walkers, even though the mountain views are part of the appeal. Others come for a festival<sup>19</sup>, or just for a weekend, often in large family groups, not all of whose members climb up to the ridgelines. The main aim is to recharge their batteries in a more natural environment, to enjoy rediscovering high-quality traditional food and to climb up to nearby viewpoints (since time was often of the essence) to see the mountains at closer quarters, take photographs and be photographed with them. Community homestay managers stress the importance of cuisine for their customers – and also in some cases their consumption of Rakshi (a spirit distilled from rice) – their desire to relax, breathe "clean air" and practice "healthy" pursuits such as walking and swimming in the hot springs which make Mirsa's homestays so popular, and even an interest in the village and agricultural work in the fields, which they often photograph (Document 9).

**Document 9: A tourist couple staying in a homestay taking photos of themselves in the community tea gardens in Lwang (Mardi Khola valley)**



A tourist couple staying in a homestay taking photos of themselves in the community tea gardens in Lwang (Mardi Khola valley), which villagers systematically encourage people to visit. The photographer positions himself to capture Machhapuchhre in the background.

P. Dérioz - 21/11/2014

## Conclusion

- 23 The as yet very incomplete findings of this article certainly include some unexpected elements. The economic and cultural “tourist transaction” (Gauché *et al.*, 2019) on which the research programme which produced them was originally based, was intended to be between local populations and mostly foreign (i.e. western) tourists, focusing in particular on the mediating role of different tourist service providers in the potential hybridisation (Sacareau, 2011) of the cultural representations of these two groups. The absence of bibliographic sources relating to this subject meant that we had not really expected to find such high numbers of Nepalese tourists in the mountains. We therefore needed a little time to factor this aspect into our research and assess its significance. Analysis of this phenomenon, aspects of which are highlighted in this article and will be the subject of a PhD thesis, is still in its infancy.
- 24 The rapid emergence in the last decade of this domestic tourism with its roots in ancient heritage and an emphasis on the recreational element of pilgrimages, for example, (cf. Bleie, 2003; Gladstone, 2005) along with mechanisms (observed elsewhere) associated with the rise of an urban middle class, means that the imbrication of domestic and international customers in the same spaces is high, with ratios varying according to the location and type of tourism. The economic relationship between Nepalese people and foreigners, be it in cultural tourism, eco-tourism, trekking or

other outdoor activities, sometimes confound predictions. The respective and very diverse underlying imaginaries of both groups clearly do not draw on the same sources, but still converge relatively frequently, for example in the value placed on very high mountain landscapes. The recent high profile secured by Nimal Purja in the history of Himalayan conquests with his ascent of 14 eight-thousanders in six months<sup>20</sup>, an organisational and sporting feat widely reported on social media and in the national press, is an example of the reappropriation of their mountains by the Nepalese people.

- 25 The current health crisis which is once again depriving Nepal of foreign customers, five years after the earthquake in 2015, is clearly dealing a very hard blow to the tourism sector, but is also serving to reinforce the economic imperative for strong domestic tourism. Many tourism stakeholders in the public sector (*Nepal Tourism Board*) and in the private sector, are campaigning for state measures to promote tourist development (tax exemptions on domestic tourist trips, extended leave periods, targeted advertising, etc.). The crisis appears once again to be generating greater awareness, and in late May funding for leave for tourist trips for civil servants was included in the provisional budget for the next tax year 2020-2021 (cf. annexe 1, last entry).

**Annexe 1 – References to articles in the Nepalese press in English referring to domestic tourism (2015-2020, a non-exhaustive list)**

Date	Journal	Article title	Author
15/10/2015	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	Peak season attracts tourists to Mustang <a href="http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2015-10-15/peak-season-attracts-tourists-to-mustang.html">http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2015-10-15/peak-season-attracts-tourists-to-mustang.html</a>	Sharma S.
28/10/2016	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	Domestic adventure seekers throng Annapurna Circuit <a href="http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-10-28/domestic-adventure-seekers-throng-annapurna-circuit.html">http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-10-28/domestic-adventure-seekers-throng-annapurna-circuit.html</a>	Sharma L.P.
29/12/2016	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	Upbeat Pokhara tourism looks forward to 2017 <a href="https://gloalkhabar.com/business/b-national/upbeat-pokhara-tourism-looks-forward-2017/">https://gloalkhabar.com/business/b-national/upbeat-pokhara-tourism-looks-forward-2017/</a>	Prasain S.
2017	<i>Nepali Headlines</i>	Tap into reliable and stable domestic tourism <a href="https://nepaliheadlines.com/tap-reliable-stable-domestic-tourism/">https://nepaliheadlines.com/tap-reliable-stable-domestic-tourism/</a>	Karki M.
21/04/2017	<i>The Himalayan Times</i>	Lomanthang attracting domestic tourists <a href="https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/lomanthang-attracting-domestic-tourists/">https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/lomanthang-attracting-domestic-tourists/</a>	Rastriya Samachar Samiti
8/10/2017	<i>The Himalayan Times</i>	Destination Nepal	Bashyal S.

6/10/2017	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	Tourism in Langtang on the upswing <a href="http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-10-06/tourism-in-langtang-on-the-upswing.html">http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2017-10-06/tourism-in-langtang-on-the-upswing.html</a> (print article published in August 2017)	Ghimire B.
24/10/2018	<i>My Republica</i>	Domestic tourism on the rise during festive holidays <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/domestic-tourism-on-the-rise-during-festive-holidays/">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/domestic-tourism-on-the-rise-during-festive-holidays/</a>	Pokharel S.
27/10/2018	<i>My Republica</i>	70 percent of guests at Sauraha hotels this season were Nepalese <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/70-percent-of-guests-at-sauraha-hotels-this-season-were-nepalese/">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/70-percent-of-guests-at-sauraha-hotels-this-season-were-nepalese/</a>	Shrestha S.
01/11/2018	<i>My Republica</i>	Nepal sees domestic tourism boom ahead of Visit Nepal Year 2020 <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-sees-domestic-tourism-boom-ahead-of-visit-nepal-year-2020-2/">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepal-sees-domestic-tourism-boom-ahead-of-visit-nepal-year-2020-2/</a>	Magar A.A.
11/11/2018	<i>My Republica</i>	Pokhara: A city of caves <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/mycity/news/pokhara-a-city-of-caves">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/mycity/news/pokhara-a-city-of-caves</a>	Basnet D.
20/02/2019	<i>My Republica</i>	Nepalis spent Rs 48b on foreign holidays <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepalis-spent-rs-48b-on-foreign-holidays/">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/nepalis-spent-rs-48b-on-foreign-holidays/</a>	
15/04/2019	<i>My Republica</i>	Rupandehi sees internal tourism surge <a href="https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/rupandehi-sees-internal-tourism-surge/">https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/news/rupandehi-sees-internal-tourism-surge/</a>	Pariyar B.
18/08/2019	<i>The Himalayan Times</i>	Developing domestic tourism <a href="https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/perspectives/developing-domestic-tourism/">https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/perspectives/developing-domestic-tourism/</a> (25/02/2020 for the online version)	
25/02/2020	<i>The Rising Nepal</i>	The Dynamics Of Domestic Tourism <a href="http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/26879">http://therisingnepal.org.np/news/26879</a>	Dahal K.
25/02/2020	<i>The Kathmandu Post</i>	Where will Nepali travellers explore? Here are the top 10 destinations <a href="https://kathmandupost.com/money/2018/12/31/where-will-nepali-travellers-explore-here-are-the-top-10-destinations">https://kathmandupost.com/money/2018/12/31/where-will-nepali-travellers-explore-here-are-the-top-10-destinations</a>	

04/05/2020	<i>The Himalayan Times</i>	Provide discount on income tax to encourage domestic travel, urges NTB <a href="https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/provide-discount-on-income-tax-to-encourage-domestic-travel-urges-ntb/">https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/provide-discount-on-income-tax-to-encourage-domestic-travel-urges-ntb/</a>	Himalayan News Service
29/05/2020	<i>The Himalayan Times</i>	Travel leave to promote domestic tourism <a href="https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/travel-leave-to-promote-domestic-tourism/">https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/travel-leave-to-promote-domestic-tourism/</a>	Magar A.A.

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## NOTES

1. With the early addition of a strong Japanese contingent (24,600 Japanese tourists on average per year between 2001 and 2012 (source NTB), accounting for between 8.4% (2002) and 3.6% (2011 and 2012) of the total number of international visitors to Nepal.
2. The growth in international arrivals is steady over the long term, despite phases of stagnation or slight decline linked to the civil war (1996-2006), the devastating earthquake in 2015, and the global health crisis in 2020, of course.
3. Source: Government of Nepal, Ministry of Culture, Tourism & Civil Aviation, 2018. *Nepal Tourism Statistics 2017*, Planning & Evaluation Division Research & Statistical Section, Kathmandu, p.16). By way of comparison, international visitor numbers in Nepal are scarcely higher than estimates in the same year (2017) of 0.9 million people for the Hautes-Pyrénées region of France (source: Observatoire du tourisme - Hautes-Pyrénées Tourisme Environnement).
4. Chinese visitors, who were almost non-existent in the early 1990s, are now the largest international customer group after Indian visitors. They are also attracted to the Himalaya regions and are a specialist clientele for trekking agencies as they are discerning about their comforts (accommodation, catering) and more interested in moderate altitude treks in forest and misty landscapes than western visitors, including during the Monsoon season.
5. « A qui appartiennent les paysages en Asie ? » (2014-2018), direction E. Gauché (UMR CITERES, université de Tours), cf. <https://aqapa.hypotheses.org/>
6. The Annapurna region attracts the highest number of international trekkers (approximately 130,000 per year), significantly more than Khumbu (35,000 to 40,000 per year for the Sagarmatha National Park) and the Langtang National Park (12,000 per year before the earthquake in 2015, which caused severe devastation in this sector).
7. In this article, see in particular the graph of the system of tourism development stakeholders on the south side of the Annapurna massif (Fig. 4 in the article): <https://journals.openedition.org/bagf/1475>
8. The Himalayan Glacier Adventure and Travel Company, which has a base in Kathmandu (cf.: <https://www.himalayanglacier.com/trekking-in-nepal/93/helambu-trek.htm>).
9. Some of these articles are given in Annexe 1 with links. Their titles often place a very explicit emphasis on this rise in domestic tourism ('Rupandehi sees internal tourism surge', *My Republica*, 15/4/2019), and on issues surrounding it ('Travel leave to promote domestic tourism', *The Himalayan*, 29/5/2020).
10. Estimates used by the author are from the WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council)
11. For example: Nepal Himalaya Treks (Kathmandu): <http://www.nepalhimalayatreks.com/program/nepal/domestic-tour-package.html>
12. The Nepalese tax year ends on 16 July.
13. Cf. for example: <https://www.thelongestwayhome.com/blog/nepal/overtourism-problem-in-nepal/>, 15/01/19.
14. "It is well recognized that domestic tourists have above average spending patterns during their short trips and if service providers can successfully identify and meet their touristic needs, that market should also continue to experience rapid growth" (Inv Board Tourism Nepal 2017).
15. The last canyon on the left bank of the Pau Khola, a tributary on the right bank of the Mardi Khola. Lumre, a Lwang-Ghalel VDC. A second site was under development in Lwang itself.
16. 80% of the 7,200 visitors to Sirubari (37 homestays, 130 beds, cf. Sedai, 2011) between 2004 and 2012 were Nepalese.

17. Among whom we should now include Chinese tourists, whose representations of the mountain landscape and approach to experiencing it differ from those of Westerners.

18. The expressions of admiration recorded during our interviews in the field (“*scenic*”, “*beautiful*”, “*marvellous*”, “*great*”, *etc.*) were reflected interestingly in the “rediscovery” of the Himalayan peaks by the inhabitants of Kathmandu due to a significant drop in pollution levels as a result of the lockdown measures imposed during the health crisis in the spring of 2020. A large number of spectacular photographs were shared on social media and published in the press (for example in the *Nepali Times*: <https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/when-the-air-is-clean/>)

19. For example, in Helambu, the Yolmo Sherpa festivals in Losar (February) and Choju (March), which are famous for their masks, the Lamas’ dances and songs, and traditional meals. A sizeable proportion of the audience is made up of people from Helambu now living in Kathmandu.

20. Ascents completed between 23 May and 29 October 2019; the previous record was 7 years.

## ABSTRACTS

The tourist system which started to grow up around trekking in the Himalayan region of Nepal in the 1970s and 1980s is now changing due to growing demand, and a greater diversity of customers and practices. Firstly, these developments are described in two different sectors (the south side of the Annapurna massif and Helambu) which have received large numbers of visitors for many years and are both located close to two of the country’s cities (Kathmandu and Pokhara), with improved links via new roads providing better access to mountain valleys. Based on interviews and observation in the field, this research then focuses in particular on the recent and little-documented surge in domestic tourism which can also be observed in these mountain areas. In the absence of statistical data, it attempts to assess the scope of this tourism, to define its practices, and to present some initial findings on the cultural representations of mountains and the mountain recreational activities underpinning this domestic tourism.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** mountains, regional change, tourism systems, landscape resources, urban-peripheral area relations, domestic tourism, Nepal

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